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# The Integrated Personnel Development System: the training & development of competent fire fighters.

Peter J. Moran

*University of Bolton, P.Moran@bolton.ac.uk*

Paul Starling

*Greater Manchester Fire & Rescue Service*

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## **The Integrated Personnel Development System: The Training & Development of Competent Fire Fighters.**

**Peter Moran, Management Department, Bolton Institute.**

**Paul Starling Greater Manchester Fire & Rescue Service**

### **Abstract.**

This paper enquires into the nature of a newly developed CPD mechanism for fire-fighters in the form of an Integrated Personnel Development System (IPDS), which proposes to base future training for every rank in the service on the acquisition and demonstration of competence for role. IPDS is due to be introduced nationally in 2005 and this work critically evaluates its introduction. The fire service in England and Wales is run on para-military lines, with up to thirteen hierarchical ranks separating the County Fire Officer from the probationary fire fighter.

Keywords: Training, Competence, IPDS, Continuing Professional Development, Fire-fighters.

### **Introduction.**

The Fire Service in England and Wales attracted much media attention in 2003 following a protracted pay dispute, in the wake of which, an offer of settlement was made, conditional upon the acceptance of a “modernisation” agenda. So much so, that the development of an Integrated Personnel Development System (IPDS), which was under development long before industrial action dominated the headlines has almost arrived unannounced and unexamined outside fire-fighting circles. One formative strand of IPDS can be traced back to Fire Service Circular (FSC) 15/97, “Training for Competence” which perhaps, signified a salient cultural shift in the Service’s approach to training and development whilst accompanied by significant cost projections yet unaccompanied by firm evidence that it will produce competent fire-fighters.

In the seven years since FCS 15/97 was issued, a large scale role mapping exercise has been undertaken for each rank and National Occupational Standards have been drawn up accordingly. IPDS is ambitious. It will eventually embrace all fire fighters, from the most junior of recruits to the County Fire Officer, train them, assess them, declare them competent and enable them to seek promotion to the next rank.

Like many local authority organisations, the Fire Service has felt the full impact of the government’s drive for Best Value and each brigade strives to meet targets set by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to remain within the upper quartile of

those brigades (of like size) it is measured against. These measurements are indexed against a number of Performance Indicators (PIs) drawn up by the Audit Commission. These include arrival times for fire engines to arrive at the scene and the “weight of attack”, i.e. the number of them that should respond to different incidents that carry different risks. For example a house fire is categorised differently than a fire at a petro-chemical complex. The Audit Commission also measure the costs of service provision. One resource that exerts a considerable influence over performance and performance improvement is the organisation’s workforce where its working and training practices and regimes are mutually influenced by its culture.

As an emergency service, the organisation has to train its employees comprehensively, to meet almost any eventually and its success in doing so is measured not just by PIs, but by the fondness of the public. A new, national training regime is to be implemented to equip fire fighters with adequate work related competencies in skill based training for them to fulfil their functional role and to maintain those standards for that given role within the organisation.

### **Competencies.**

Fire Service Circular (FSC) 15/97 ‘Training for Competence’ (1998) heralded one of the most important cultural shifts in the service’s approach to training and development. The introduction of competence-based training will have significant cost implications and this drive in the Fire Service’s approach to competence-based training is being developed with little evidence that it will produce a competent worker within a “Best Value” framework.

When considering competencies, should they be considered the same as other personal qualities such as personality traits? According to Woodruffe (1993) as cited by Shevels (2002:11), competencies are indeed the same as aspects of personality such as traits, qualities and motives. However, Shevels (2002:12) accepts that definition yet warns that the practising manager or human resource professional also frequently misunderstands those concepts. He goes on to state that it is vital, even crucial to be able to differentiate competency (ies) from competence(s).

Although competencies deal with understanding capabilities and the attributes and behaviours people may need to do a particular job effectively (that is to be competent), they are not concerned with outputs, roles, or tasks relating to the job itself, those are the job competencies.

### **Training and Development.**

Fire services in the United Kingdom (UK) have given much greater emphasis and attention to the training and development of staff in recent years. The Manpower Services Commission (1981:62) defined training as: *A planned process to modify attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour through learning experiences to achieve effective performance in an activity or range of activities. Its purpose in the work situation is to develop the abilities to the individual and to satisfy the current and future manpower needs of the organisation.*

A clear and visible indication of the strategic importance of training and development is the inclusion of the following extract from GMCFS mission statement: *We recognise that our staff are our most valuable resource and will train and develop them for the benefit of the authority and the community.* The fact that the organisation includes such rhetoric should not however be considered absolute proof as to its strategic importance since failing to advocate the importance of training and development ‘*would be almost tantamount to proclaiming that employees were of little value and not worth investing in*’ Legge (1995:193).

However, the author believes that an organisation which trains its workforce is much more likely to protect its investment by offering better career prospects and more likely to take the selection and appraisal system equally seriously. With this in mind, it is perhaps also true that if an organisation demands commitment to its strategic objectives from its employees, then a reciprocal arrangement is due in regard to training and development. Johnson and Scholes (1999:471) suggest: ‘*Training and development may also be used as a common set of reference points to which people can relate their own work and priorities, and a common language with which to communicate with other parts of the organisation*’. Lundy & Cowling (1996:292) phrase it thus: ‘*Strategic training and development has a central part to play in bringing about the alignment of an organisation’s human resource capability with its strategies*’.

For these functions to be of strategic, long-term significance, they have to be regarded as fundamental. Training can be considered as a relatively short-term process designed to allow the individual to fulfil a specific task or role. Neither the individual nor the organisation will develop without continuing education and that education will assist in the forming of character, ability, knowledge and achievement.

### **Training and Development**

All organisations should be aware that the training and development of their workforce in some degree or another would enable them to gain a competitive advantage that is required over

their competitors. The fire service is different, as it has no direct competition, so competitive advantage stems from service delivery of an exceptionally high standard. This will require the organisation to train the workforce to be effective yet efficient in all the highly complex tasks that the organisation undertakes in either day-to-day functions or in an emergency situation. Discharging those functions, employees must work to a standard that the customer and the organisation have come to expect.

Training requirements are undertaken by the organisation in a structured manner, Corbridge and Philbeam (1998:222) suggest: *Training is a planned activity conducted over a short term to impact on specific job related knowledge, skills and attitudes*, which means that it may fulfil a short term skill gap in the workforce's abilities but as they go on to state: *whilst education (development) is a much longer term process, and often not job related at all*.

Consequently, if the workforce is an organisation's most valuable resource, then training in both the short term (to deliver immediately required skills) and in the longer term (to give future required skills) should be seen as a priority by the organisation and it must ensure personnel are given every opportunity to develop themselves. It must also be understood *how* the workforce is to be developed so as to achieve the organisation's corporate and strategic aims. This should act to ensure that personnel benefit two fold, firstly for the organisation and secondly for their own training needs. Pearn *et al* (1995:40) state that this 'shared vision' should '*...recognise the importance of learning at individual, group and system level in order not only to survive but also to thrive in an increasingly unpredictable world*'.

The fire service will have to go through major changes to its training regimes in the near future. One driver of change resulted from a tragic incident when two fire fighters lost their lives attending an operational incident. The subsequent Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigation discovered a lack of evidence of fire fighters being trained to carry out the task they were undertaking. The training and qualification systems were not established to enable the organisation to accurately record what had been taught to and more importantly learned by these individuals. In its conclusion, the HSE (1991) stated: '*The service was not providing adequate training and development for its people*' and further committed itself to promote change which had the founding principle of 'minimising risk'.

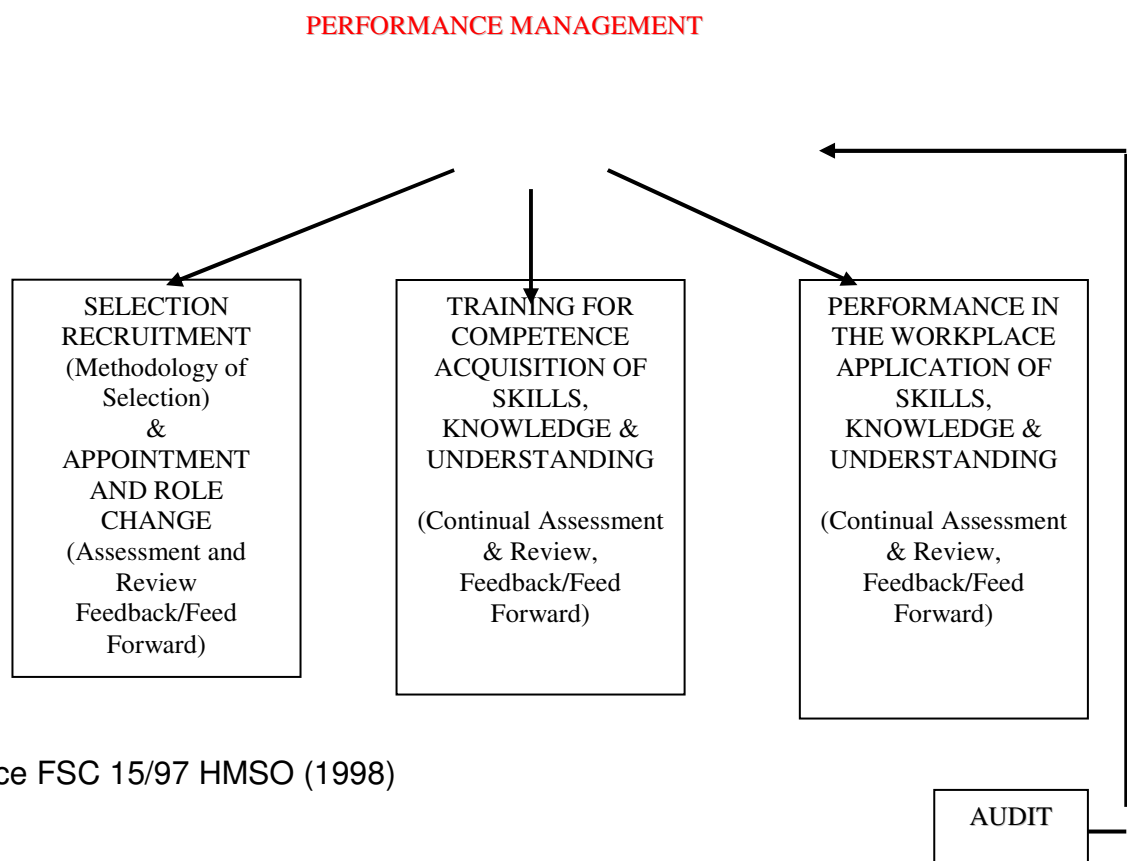
The enquiries from the HSE led to two main developments. The first was acceptance that training needed to be based on the principles of competence and the second was the development of plans for an Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS).

This new training system has developed Performance Standards that have been cross-mapped to fire service functional roles. These roles will eventually replace the existing rank structure and the fire service will have a new qualification structure.

### Development of Competence Training

Training for Competence and individual development are important factors that are in any management system. FSC 15/97 (see Figure 1 below) shows key components of selection, training and workplace performance within the performance management system.

Figure 1



Source FSC 15/97 HMSO (1998)

The selection and recruitment process has been designed to reflect the standards of the entrance examination into the fire service (i.e. a national entrance standard for all UK fire services). These are 'minimum requirement' standards and only test the applicant in a pass or fail capacity. They should test for stamina, duration and repetition of a range of physical and mental tasks that a fire fighter would face. Once the applicant has entered the

service, the training regime is developmental and is under constant review to ascertain best practice so that training is kept to a high standard.

The document goes on further to state that such a dynamic approach to training will ensure:

- The organisation and the people it employs are responsive to change.
- The organisation and employees are committed to developing and maintaining a learning culture.
- People have ownership of the standards and performance to be achieved.
- Every person is committed to continuous professional development and actively seeks ways of achieving this and
- The organisation and its people learn from both success and failure.

Frank Duffield (2003) the IPDWG project co-ordinator for Humberside also stresses that: *Competence is the driver to implementing IPDS not the vocational qualification*. When designing a training intervention intended to contribute to improvement it is important to differentiate between the Performance Standards that can be achieved on a training programme and the Performances Standards that need to be demonstrated in the workplace. To achieve Operational Performance Standards (OPS), it may be that other post course activities such as coaching, gaining practical experience and on-the-job training will have to be addressed. It is also essential to agree whether or not the point of entry test is suitable for the potential trainees' ability to participate and successfully complete the programme. With this in mind, the following table links learning outcomes (developed by IPDS) and organisational strategic objectives:

Table 2

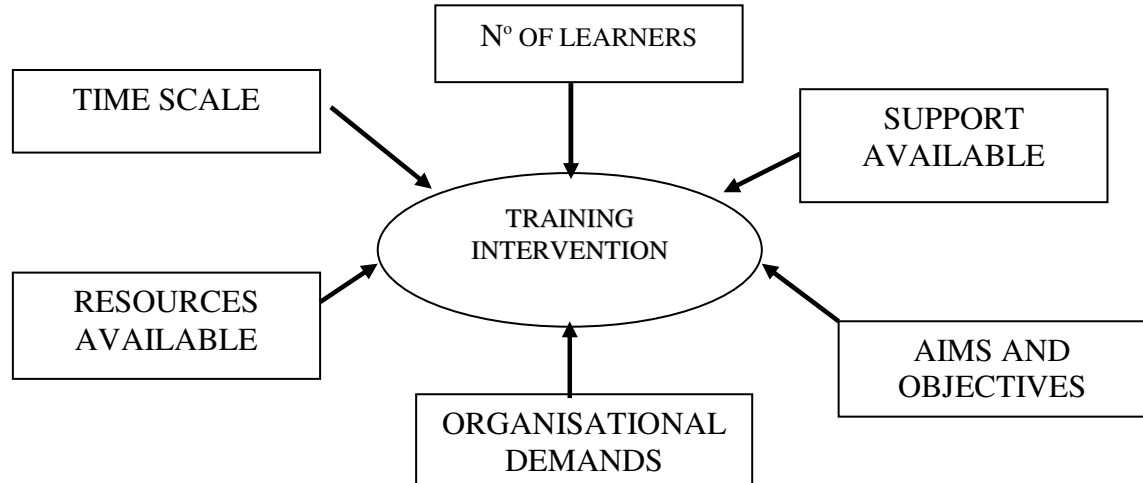
Task Skills	Training programme establishes business and performance metrics against which to gauge success
Task Management Skills	Examines the extent to which the trainees have to apply the learning in the workplace to OPS
Contingency Skills	Examines the ability of the trainees to adapt and react to changing situations in a positive manner utilising their existing training and knowledge
Environmental Skills	Measures the success of the training in respect of decisions made operational against service delivery expectations

Source: Adapted from IPDS (2002).

Table 2 illustrates how IPDS links core competencies to personnel and organisational growth. It does not however show at this stage how the organisation should implement a training strategy. There is a link to the organisation's strategic objectives and its training requirements. As Armstrong (1990:197) suggests: *Development and Training of staff prepares them to take on additional responsibilities in the future, whilst the performance in their present job is improved*'.

The concept of employee development in relation to competence based training and organisational growth is that a competence based system will measure not what you say you can do but what you show you can do. Within this process, you demonstrate you are competent by actually carrying out a particular job to the required standards. This training function links employee development with the organisation's development. Once there are clearly written, concise and accurate performance objectives, the organisation will be in a better position to identify the most effective training intervention to support the development of its workforce.

A range of intervention methods will depend on a number of factors as depicted in Figure 2 below:



Source: Brookes (1995:81)

Once the above factors have been identified, the difference between the employees' perceived skills and actual skill level could be identified within a competence-based framework. This is known as the competence gap i.e. the difference between the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the learner to perform their job role effectively or competently and the skills, knowledge and understanding currently held by that learner. This development function of the organisation clearly emphasises the 'people focus' of employee development. Stewart (1999:83)



suggests: *management are linked to personnel or employee development and are responsible and accountable for the performance of those personnel within the operational functions and performance of those functions.*

Reid and Barrington (1997:83) concur by stating that employee development is a *management responsibility* and further that *'the contribution of the development of personnel to support organisational objectives through ensuring appropriate and effective learning.*

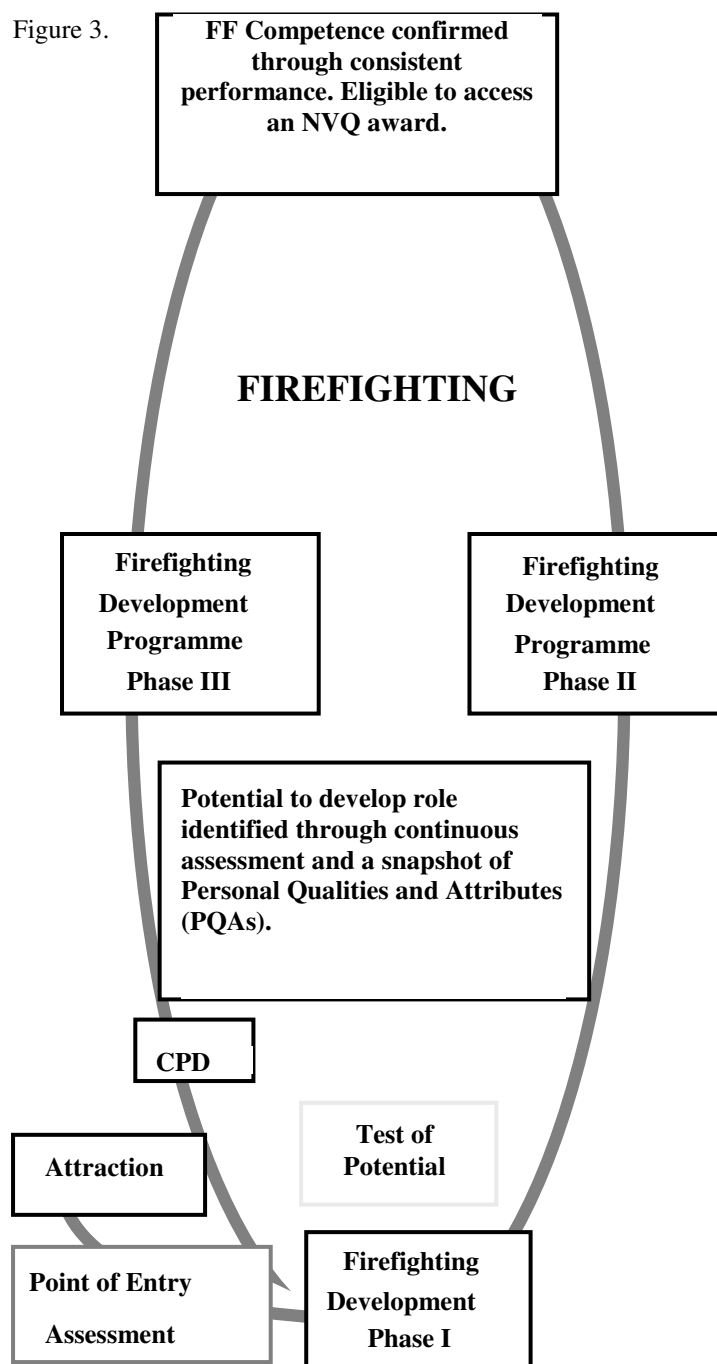
The organisation is top led, hierarchical and steeped in tradition and culture. Management and leadership must work hand in hand for the organisation to progress. Without the role of leadership being taken into account the strategies and indeed the culture of the organisation will be directionless. Leadership within the fire service has been influenced by the single tier entry system and the skills developed by managers have been by their own experiences and by studying senior managers at work. In recent times, where management studies have been made available to future leaders, to categorise and further develop their skills, perhaps these can be cross-related to management strategies which will help in the developmental process of training outcomes and goals.

Although there have been extensive writings on the subject of training and development within the fire service by authors including Ord, (2002: 16) on *'IPDS: the way forward'* and Smith, (1998) on *'Training for Competence- Is it a leap of Faith?'* based upon research of a competence-based framework following the HSE report (1991) implementation is a task full of challenges. This form of training regime will change the way training is carried out and enable personnel to acquire skills, knowledge and understanding necessary for the effective and safe performance of their work, both in current and future roles. In doing so, it may act to ensure the achievement of organisational aims and objectives for service delivery, improved performance and more over, create and maintain a satisfied workforce.

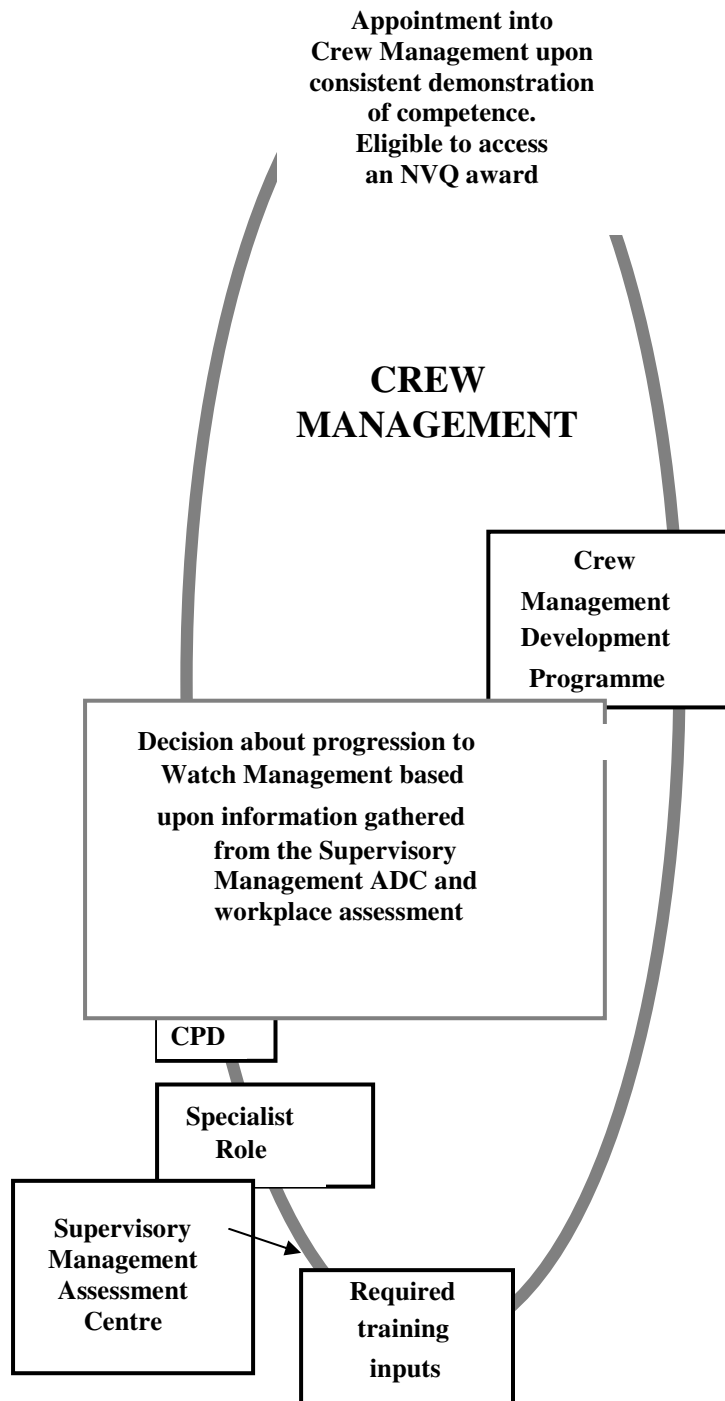
The purpose of this strategy was stated by the IPDS Working Group (IPDSWG, 2000): *To secure the effective and efficient delivery of the Brigade's services to its customers, to secure the health, safety and welfare of all Brigade employees.* It further states: *and to meet the job related aspirations of individual employees and encompass a continuous improvement culture.* The model utilised for a continuation, competence based training regime is a single Helix model shown in Figure 3 below.

IPDS has been defined by Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service as: *'...a system or framework that when integrated into the organisation's daily working encourages and supports both personal and organisational development'* ([www.hantsfire.gov.uk](http://www.hantsfire.gov.uk)). Components of the IPDS cycle are: to acquire skills, attain core competency, maintain competency, identify new skills and acquire new skills. The model for the Competence based training regime is effectively 'Cradle to Grave' training and personal development system for all staff within the fire service as there are separate helix arrangements for each hierarchical uniformed grade and alternative helix arrangements for all non-uniformed staff.. To fully understand the recruitment process, the organisation must first identify the type of person suited to become a fire fighter with all the necessary attributes and potential capabilities to begin the extensive training programme contained within phase 1 development.

Figure 3.



Those that demonstrate their competence as a firefighter and seek promotion may then be moved onto the next development cycle as illustrated in Figure 4 below.



Point of Entry Assessment tests for those applying to join the Fire Service are based on National Standards and test for those characteristics illustrated in Table 2. Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service suggest that from 2005 applications will probably be via a nationwide website that will offer the capability to '*screen out serial applicants and those unable to meet the basic criteria*' and that testing will be against nationally defined standards based upon the

Personal Qualities and Attributes (PQAs) appropriate to the firefighter's role.

The National Point of Entry Steering Group, in their first Newsletter (October, 2002) suggest that: *One of the key components of the Integrated Personal Development System (IPDS) is the point of entry for firefighters into the service. In December 2001, the Fire Policy Unit sought tenders for, and then awarded a contract to consultants to develop point of entry selection system for firefighters. These were to be designed to enable brigades across the country to select trainee firefighters on the same basis, using the same tests, to appropriate standard.* ([www.firepod.org.uk](http://www.firepod.org.uk) 11.03.04.).

**Table 2 Current Recruit Fire Fighter Entry tests.**

Written paper	
Verbal, numerical, perceptual	These papers are designed so that all questions cannot be answered in time unless the candidate is exceptionally clever.
Bennett's Mechanical paper	This paper is designed so the candidate can answer all the questions and check their answers.
Essay	150 Words in 15 minutes - legible
Practical tests:	
Shuttle run	Level 9.6
Strength test	Simulated pump lift (50kg).
Ladder test	Ladder extension in 20 seconds (c.50kg)
BA Test	Vertigo
	Claustrophobia

Source: Recruitment Department GMCFS (2002)

Once the potential candidate has been successful they then continue on the Training programme and enter Phase 1 through to Phase 3 of the developmental process.

**Table 3 Current Firefighter Development Schedule**

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Length of Service</i>	<i>Area of Training</i>
<i>1</i>	1 – 16 weeks (0 - .3 year)	Recruits Course and Initial Breathing Apparatus Course
<i>2</i>	17 – 104 weeks (.3 – 2 years)	National Vocational Qualification BA Assessment Initial Fire Safety
<i>3</i>	105 – 1560 weeks (2 – 30 years)	Fire Behaviour Training BA Refresher BA Instructor LGV/EFAD (driving) Road Traffic Accident TNG Trauma Physical Education Rope Access Water Policy H&S/ Equal Ops etc

Source GMCFS (2000).

The Continuing Professional Development from one phase to the next is an ongoing process based upon an individual's ability to maintain and perform their role. This includes personal development, which caters for the changing fire service environment. Matthews (1999:25) suggests that not only do workplace characteristics affect learning opportunities within the organisation but also the conditions of the internal and external work environment which will reflect on current working practices and regimes already in place. Fire fighters need to be equipped with skills and competencies to deal with the day-to-day functions of the organisation. Table 4 shows those required competencies:

**Table 4. Firefighter Development Modules**

<i>People</i>	Equality and Fairness Personal Development Health, Safety and Risk Management Employee Relations
<i>Physical Resources</i>	Maintaining Internal Resources
<i>Operations</i>	Environmental Risks and Control Hazards and Risks- Buildings and Structures Dealing with transport incidents Dealing with Fire Incidents Dealing with HAZMAT incidents Save and Rescue Endangered Life Treat Casualties and Support People at Incidents Community Safety and Advice and Support Drive Operational Vehicles

Source: IPDS Development Modules (2002).

Whilst the 'IPDS Helix' model is a concept modelling CPD and continuation training, it is also a framework to enable the Fire Service to equip itself with the abilities to address the needs of the service as it faces the rigours of modernisation.

### **Pointers to Potential Critical Assessment of IPDS**

Although it may appear premature to give consideration to the problems that may accompany the introduction of the IPDS, perhaps these potential limitations might provide further valuable insights.

- The model has limitations, particularly with its application to monitoring performance.
- The model does not deal with local factors that may affect the training regime required by the organisation (e.g. "leadership issues").
- It does not take into account additional resource implications to deliver this training and development and to direct more resources towards it may transgress understandings of "Best Value".
- Which personnel are equipped to undertake the Training Needs Analysis (TNA) required for fire fighter development? Is this done by fire fighters themselves, by their managers or in some hybridised combination?
- Consideration has to be given to "Ridership" (i.e. the adequate "manning of pumps") and this has an impact on the release of personnel from operational duties to attend training courses.
- How will best practice be communicated from brigade to brigade?
- Is the training to be cascaded from a central location?
- If so, what monitoring and review processes are in place to safeguard standards?

### **Conclusions.**

Overall, the IPDS helix appears a rational approach to training in the Fire Service at national rather than local level, in that it provides a common framework for fire-fighter development and minimises the potential for those aspects of CPD most favoured by senior officers in particular brigades to become unduly over emphasised. It may also provide standardised point of entry tests.

It adopts a competence approach that both practitioners and members of the public should perhaps welcome. It also provides a route into CPD, which appears to have clarity and transparency at its centre. Yet the jury remains firmly out. There are a number of foreseeable difficulties that may impinge upon its success (or perceived success) that appear to be just as constrictive as they are predictable.

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